While the French, during Barack Obama’s presidential campaign, overwhelmingly responded in a survey that they would be willing to elect a black president, the French language paradoxically does not have a proper epithet to name the American president. On 4 June 2008, Figaro journalist Pierre Rousselin described the then winner of the Democratic nomination as ‘a 46-year-old métis’. Métis, a word embedded in the French history of slavery and colonialism, and today synonymous with either denigration or praise of racial and cultural mixing, has acted as Obama’s default epithet in the French mainstream media. Through a reflection on the naming of the American president in French newspapers and in political or theoretical writings – from Metropolitan France and from the French Overseas Department of Martinique – this chapter’s main concern is to illuminate the discrepancies between racial perceptions and constructions in continental France and in Martinique. While the Metropolitan French media favour the epithet métis, Martinicans privilege the process of creolization to attempt to describe the

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1 All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.
2 To the Figaro (2008) survey, ‘Seriez-vous prêts à voter pour un président noir en France?’, 61.3 per cent of the 25,120 respondents replied that they would.
American Creoles

The representation of Obama, then, functions as a helpful medium to reflect on contemporary racial and cultural constructions that do not travel well.

Obama as a symbol represents a particularly compelling example of the untranslatability of race since, as the new head of state of a powerful Western Nation, and as an immediately recognizable figure in global consciousness, he cannot be dismissed as a negligible exception. The notions of métissage – which attempts to stabilize race – and creolization – which destabilizes racial constructs – will guide us through our analysis of the naming and misnaming of Obama in Metropolitan France and in Martinique. My choice of the case of the French-Caribbean island of Martinique is particularly important in understanding the impact of the election of Obama on the collective psyche of a people predominantly issued from the Black Diaspora, located in the Americas, yet still part and parcel of France and of the European Union. The sense of influence between Martinique and Obama goes in both directions. Martinican creolization theory destabilizes the assignation of a fixed racial identity to the American president while Obama as a symbol links Martinican Creole consciousness to a worldwide redefinition of the dynamics between power and race.

The Trap of Métissage

The Figaro quotation cited above defining Obama as métis illustrates the essentialism to which Obama has been subjected in the French press. He is first and foremost defined by his race, not by his abilities to govern. The description, ‘a 46-year-old métis’, encompassing age and racial categorization, strangely echoes nineteenth-century bills of sale of enslaved humans. The word métis deserves special attention since it holds no equivalent in the English language, or in the American racial, legal or historical contexts. In the 1967 edition of Harrap’s Dictionary, métis is translated as ‘half-breed’, ‘cross-bred’ or ‘mongrel (dog)’. A ‘plante métisse’ is a ‘hybrid plant’. In the 2007 edition, the definition hasn’t changed much, since métis is still translated as ‘half-caste’ or ‘half-breed’. Clearly inscribed in the discourse on race as a manifestation of biological hybridity, the word métis therefore shocks because it is derived from the basic colonial assumption that races are biologically discrete entities.

3 The métis has been historically and legally treated as an aberration, an accident. See Kandé, 1999: 13–34 (Introduction).

4 On the temporal and discursive coincidence between the appearance of the word métis and the invention of racial categories, see Kandé, 1999: 13–14.
On the level of historical accuracy, the use of the term *métissage* is also misleading, since it does not have an exact equivalent in the US context. While it resembles the term ‘miscegenation’, and can sometimes be synonymous with it, the two terms are grounded in different legal practices. *Métissage* and miscegenation historically differ since the 1685 *Code noir* comprised a third category of *métis* born of the union of unmarried free men with enslaved women. The slave and her children, should, according to the letter of the law, be legitimized and emancipated. In contrast, the US ‘One-Drop Rule’ allowed for only two categories (Davis, 1991: 4–6). In this absolute black-and-white binary system, *métissage* disappeared into the ‘black’ category. The use of *métis* by the French therefore appears as the projection of a category of thinking foreign to the US context. Commenting on the use by the French media of words such as *métis*, at best, or at worst, *mulâtre* (*mulatto*), to define Obama, American commentator on French politics Arthur Goldhammer sharply warns his readers that: ‘words denoting mixed racial origins such as “mulatto,” “octaroon,” [sic] and “high-yellow” can still be found in Faulkner but have dropped out of everyday American use’ (Goldhammer, 2008).

However, most French journalists bracket out the racist history and connotations of the word *métis*. Obama’s *métissage* is often presented as a form of enthusiastic praise of cultural mixing. Philippe Boulet-Gercourt, US correspondent for *Le Nouvel Observateur*, introduces Obama’s success and charisma with three epithets: ‘Youth, Idealism, and Métissage’ (Boulet-Gercourt, 2008). In this use of *métissage* as the ultimate example of multicultural success, the racialist origin of the term is banished to oblivion.

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5 See Chesnais 1998: article 9. The marriage between free and enslaved will be rendered illegal in the 1724 rewriting of the black code.

6 As Goldhammer points out on his blog: ‘French speakers should refrain from describing anyone in English as a “half-breed” or product of “miscegenation” unless they mean to be offensive’ (Goldhammer, 2008). Moreover, Obama himself escapes this model of American miscegenation since his mixed double heritage is a result of a postslavery encounter, resulting from immigration. According to Marcus Mabry, Obama has been described as ‘postracial’ and thus less threatening than a descendant of American slavery: ‘His story is, in part, an immigrant’s story, devoid of the particular wounds that descendants of American slavery carry’ (Mabry, 2008). For Mabry, this specific ‘postracial’ mixing allows whites to see Obama as ‘not too black’ to be electable, but also ‘not black enough’ for some African Americans who consider that his cultural and historical difference does not represent them fully.

7 Goldhammer’s comments as well as the postings on his blog provide a good illustration of the issue of positioning Obama racially in France.
Métis, while deeply rooted in a racialist categorization of humanity, also paradoxically allows one to imagine a simplifying multiculturalism in which difference has ceased to function under the guise of a blind idealism. Indeed, métissage often functions in the media as an unproblematic celebration of difference masking cultural differences and violence (see Amselle, 1999: 35). This sort of multiculturalism, for Kwame Anthony Appiah, seems to ‘encompass everything and nothing […] and designates the disease it purports to cure’ (Appiah 2006: xiii). This is precisely the danger of métissage: proclaiming the illusory victory of sameness, while using a word rooted in racialist thinking.

Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century categories of thought tend not to shock the French public, and are used by even the most progressive journalists and writers. For the French, Obama is a ‘safe black’, or rather a ‘safe métis’, because he is the exception and his category is fixed … which makes us wonder who the French readers of the Figaro had in mind when 61 per cent of them responded that they would be ready to elect a black president.8

One could argue back that the French embracing of Obama’s métissage is good willed and has had positive effects. And, indeed, it has. From blogs showing their support to Obama, to organized political initiatives, France was struck by ‘Obamamania’. From the trivial to the serious, from political activism to erotic desire, Obama compelled the French. ‘Get out the vote’ French initiatives, for instance, brought Americans living in France to cast their ballot in overwhelming numbers. However, we should be suspicious of that love, as long as it remains linked to a fascination for métissage. As Françoise Vergès has shown, in her monumental Monsters and Revolutionaries, the fascination and love for métissage is just the other side of the coin of its denigration. Métissage, Vergès contends, ‘contain[s] at heart an ambiguity […] that to some anticolonialists offered a radical challenge to the process of mono-identification and European racism, and to others meant the disappearance and the lapse of memory’ (Vergès 1999: 8–9).

Métissage in the French imaginary thus represents love and hate, fear and desire, lust and disgust. The ‘métis’ Obama clearly falls on the side of love, often erotic love: KikiBird, a French blogger, asks, ‘Why do French women love Obama?’ inviting her readers to ‘bring sexy back to the White House!’ (KikiBird 2008). Obama’s erotic appeal is clearly linked to his perceived racial inheritance. Referring to Obama’s appearance on television in the

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8 Obama’s US citizenship and culture also make him more acceptable to the eyes of the French than a man of West-African background. On the ‘décalage’ or gradation between the perception of black Americans and black Africans in France, see Edwards, 2003: 11–14.
Ellen DeGeneres Show, KikiBird comments: ‘I think he got his dancing skills from his mom’s side of the gene pool, but it’s soooowowoo cute!’ (ibid.). Far from claiming that the French who use the word *métis* to define Obama commit acts of conscious racism, I want to argue that the French language itself fails to seize a figure that escapes quick racial, cultural and historical categories, and that the person of Obama provokes – or should provoke – a paradigmatic shift in our perception and representation of humanity beyond racial categories.

The alternative description of Obama to the word *métis* is the use of the adjective *noir*. The black community in France, for whom Obama sparks a ‘new black consciousness’, according to a June 2008 *New York Times* article, enthusiastically adopts the term. However, the term ‘noir’ is as problematic in France as it is in the United States. Literary scholar Louis Chude-Sokei (2007) argues that the ‘all-consuming category of “black”’ misclassifies Obama, who complicates both the black and white divide and the definition of African American.

Significantly, French journalists extremely rarely use the term ‘Africain Américain’ to describe Obama. A systematic word search in *Le Monde* revealed that Obama was called ‘Africain Américain’ in a grand total of four articles from January to June 2008. The French media are not generally resistant to using English words such as ‘blogger’, ‘sniper’ or even ‘les Blacks’. So, why this dismissal of the term ‘Africain Américain’? The French, from the 1789 *Déclaration des droits de l’homme et du citoyen* to the 1905 *Loi de laïcité*, two founding legal documents when it comes to the invisibility of race in France, take the separation between citizenship and religious, gender and ethnic specificities seriously. Under a blanket Republicanism, originally implemented to protect individual differences, a French person is only a citizen: not a woman, not a man, not a Muslim, not an Antillean woman.9

The term ‘Africain Américain’ violates the rule of Republicanism precisely because it combines citizenship with cultural or ethnic difference. Translated into a French context, Obama’s African Americanness is simply invisible. The hyphenated term ‘Français-nord-africains’ is equally unthinkable. However, the daily experience of discrimination of ‘visible minorities’ persistently contradicts the spirit of the Republic. In media representation and

9 Hence the illegality in France – something surprising to Americans used to checking their ethnic box – of polling citizens and migrants about race, citizenship, ethnic and religious background, which prevents affirmative action, or, as the French cynically call it, ‘positive discrimination’. This law of invisibility is sacrosanct in France, a matter of French pride that can mask an unwillingness to recognize discrimination.
stereotypes, in police harassment, in workplace inequities, visible minorities, sometimes French for three and even four generations, sometimes for more than a century, remain highly visible second-class citizens to the so-called ‘Français de souche’ or ‘pure French’ (see, e.g., Hargreaves, 2007 [1995] and Rosello, 1998: 1–20).

To summarize, métissage fails to translate Obama’s mixed identity and the term ‘African American’ escapes French categories of thought. If the term ‘African American’ succeeds in classifying Obama within US census categories, it is nonetheless insufficient to grasp Obama’s cultural complexity. By examining the treatment of Obama in Martinique, the next two sections shift the focus from the failure to classify Obama biologically or racially to the more promising gesture of defining him culturally through the lens of creolization theory.

**Obama as a Martinican Creole?**

A detour through the French Overseas Department of Martinique and through Martinican thinker Édouard Glissant’s notion of creolization helps us to name Obama within the French language, and even perhaps on a global level that would transcend national, linguistic and ethnic boundaries. While Malian cultural theorist Manthia Diawara has called Obama the ‘président des terriens’ [president of all humans] (Diawara 2008), and while Obama encountered an unprecedented worldwide scream of enthusiasm immediately following his election, he seems to have been particularly readily assimilated within Martinique’s cultural and political realms.

One could even say that Obama has been Martinicanized. His name and image have been incorporated into the country’s commercial and cultural landscape. His first name, homonymous with baraque or ‘shack’, was used to name, for instance, a restaurant shack on the beach at Sainte-Luce (Fig. 1). There is a Martinican Obama fan club on Facebook, which uses the creolized slogan ‘yes nou ni canne!’ and sugar cane stalks as its profile image since ‘can’ is homonymous with canne, or ‘sugar cane’. A street in the town of Le Diamant has been named after the American president (Fig. 2). Of symbolic importance is also the fact that Glissant elected Le Diamant as his Martinican residence, and that the town has become an important memory site with the edification of a monument – fifteen massive human figures

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10 ‘The newly dubbed Rue Obama extends from the heart of the picturesque city of Le Diamant, located along the island’s pristine southern coast, to the sea. Fittingly, the street measures 144 meters for the 44th President of the United States.’ See HighBeam Research, 2009.
facing the sea, sculpted by Martinican artist Laurent Valère to the memory of the drowned victims of an 1830 slaveship wreck (Fig. 3). The choice of Le Diamant for the naming of the ‘Rue Barack Obama’ is thus highly significant because it inscribes Obama’s name in the continuum of a landscape memorializing the Martinican Diasporic memory, in a gesture similar to Glissant’s vision of Obama as ‘son of the abyss’, which I analyse below.

As J. Michael Dash has shown, the Diamond Rock, located in Le Diamant, is central to Glissantian imaginary (Dash, 2004: 94–109).
In this wealth of integration of Obama into the physical and cultural landscape of Martinique, the video ‘Obama martiniquais’ (2009) created by the local group S-CREWW Productions, and available on YouTube, stands out. The video dubs one of Obama’s campaign speeches in French and in Martinican Creole. ‘Martinican Obama’ begins his speech with a confession: ‘Je n’ai jamais été ni un Américain, ni un Hawaïen, en réalité, moin cé un Matinikè’ [I was never an American nor a Hawaiian, in fact, I am a Martinican]. Notable is the fact that Hawaïi and Martinique are presented as nations on the same level as the United States. In a parallel nationalist move, Martinican Obama switches from French to Creole as soon as he proclaims his Martinican citizenship. The election of a black man from Hawai’i has certainly helped to fuel, at least symbolically if not politically, the recent strikes and protests in Martinique and Guadeloupe for more autonomy from the French government.

12 Obama’s birth and early upbringing in Hawai’i creates yet another link with Martinicans. The 50th American State occupies a political position similar to the French Overseas Department.

13 Important to note is the temporal proximity of the election of the American president with the generalized strikes in Martinique and Guadeloupe.
In the aforementioned video, not only does Obama acquire Martinican Creole speech but soon after evoking his Martinican citizenship in Creole, he lists, as proof of the authenticity of his belonging to Martinique, a selection of his favourite things to eat, which include ‘dachine’ (dasheen or taro root), ‘pois d’angole’ (Congo peas) and ‘queue d’cochon’ (pig tails). Obama does not ingest just any type of Martinican food, but, specifically, ingredients strongly tied to the memory of survival under slavery, to root vegetables linked to the earth and to African ingredients. Obama is not only assimilated to Martinican identity, but also assimilates it, through eating and speaking Creole. The strong association between Creole language and Creole food is particularly significant in the Martinican context. As Celia Britton demonstrated in her essay ‘Eating Their Words’, literary critics tend to describe the language of Martinican and other Caribbean writers by a profusion of culinary metaphors (Britton, 1996: 15–23). For European critics, Caribbean novelists write a peppery, vanilla-scented and spicy language. In short, ‘in the European imagination, the Caribbean has always been associated with things that you put in your mouth’ (ibid.: 15). Britton compellingly argues that the literal consumption of the Caribbean by Europeans who ingest its ‘rum, coffee, tobacco, coconuts, fruit, etc.’ (ibid.) goes hand in hand with the metaphorical treatment of Caribbean novels and Caribbean language as palatable products. In the occurrence of Obama speaking Creole language as he utters the name of Creole dishes, however, we seem to be faced with a different type of encounter. The association of food and language, in this particular example, is not a case of exotic reduction of Creole language to Creole food, but, rather, a case in which language and food contribute to the construction of a complex, creolized self. The food items listed are not the typical tropical dishes of the touristic vision such as bananas, coconuts and spice. Instead, the vegetables, tubers and salt meat are loaded with a historical

December 2008 to February 2009 Guadeloupeans and Martinicans were in upheaval against the high cost of living and demanded more autonomy. The protests included marches of more than 100,000 people at a time. The people were united under the leadership of the autonomist organization LKP (Lyannaj Kont Pwofitasyon, or Union Against Profit), led by figures such as Guadeloupean unionist Elie Domota. The strikes, which were anti-imperialist and autonomist in nature, could not of course have been inspired by American politics. For a chronicle of the strikes in Martinique and for a summary of the movement’s ideology, see Nemo, 2009. However, the symbolic power of the election of a black man as president of the United States was undeniably energizing. For a discussion of the adoption of the Obama campaign iconography by Caribbean protestors, see Bonilla, 2010.
American Creoles

African-Caribbean tradition of resistance (see further my article ‘Between Breadfruit and Masala: Food Politics in Glissant’s Martinique’: Loichot, 2007: 124–37). Additionally, the association of ‘Martinican Obama’ with food is not a unilateral movement of assimilation whereby the historical figure would be turned into a palatable food item. Instead, ‘Martinican Obama’ assimilates food and projects it back into a linguistic form in an interactional movement. In this particular case, then, food acts not as a mode of impoverishing assimilation, but as a form of interactive cultural creolization.

The widespread acclaim for Obama in Martinique, however, is not unanimous. Obama’s skin, and the history it carries, is not an automatic passport that he could wave to claim an automatic right to Martinican and Creole identity. Martinican writer Raphaël Confiant, for instance, is one of the most virulent detractors of the assimilation of Obama into Martinican culture. In an essay published online after the death of Michael Jackson, ‘Pitié pour Michael Jackson’, Confiant (2009) laments the symbolic violence experienced in the United States and in the world by imposed European standards of beauty. He presents Jackson as a victim of this symbolic violence, which led him deeply to alter his skin and facial bone structure to conform to European norms of beauty. So far, Confiant’s criticism seems fair. However, things start to spoil when he uses the example of Barack Obama as one of the perpetrators of this white symbolic violence imposed on African Americans such as Michael Jackson, contrasting the ‘white’ president of the United States with the ‘black’ president of South Africa: ‘Pourquoi le chrétien monogame habillé à l’occidentale Obama qui parle un anglais raffiné (“West Coast”) nous plaît tant alors que l’animiste polygame vêtu de peau de bête lors des danses tribales et qui ne craint pas de s’exprimer en zoulou Jacob Zuma (président de l’Afrique du Sud) hérisse beaucoup d’entre nous?’ [Why does the Christian monogamous Western-dressed Obama who speaks a refined (‘West Coast’) English so please us while the animistic polygamist clad in animal skin in the tribal dances and who is not afraid to speak Zulu, Jacob Zuma (president of South Africa), irritates many of us?] (Confiant, 2009). Leaving Confiant’s rather stereotypical description of the South-African president aside, I will concentrate on his depiction of the American president. For Confiant, Obama’s clothing, religion or linguistic orthodoxy strip him of his colour, as if clothing or language could substitute for the visibility of skin, and for the past history and present experience of violence that ‘overdetermines’ it, to use a Fanonian term (Fanon, 1952: 93).

In his memoirs, Obama addresses at great length what Martinican psychiatrist Frantz Fanon would have called the ‘overdetermination’ of his skin ‘from the outside’ (Obama, 2004 [1995]). He describes the long evenings spent reading writers of the Harlem Renaissance as well as Fanon
himself. More specifically, Obama identifies the foundational moment in which the weight of the colour of his skin hit him frontally, so to speak. While in Indonesia, the child then called Barry was leafing through a daily newspaper when he saw the picture of a man with ‘crinkly hair, heavy lips, and broad, fleshy nose, all had this same uneven ghostly hue [...] he must be terribly sick [...] A radiation victim, I thought’ (ibid.: 30). After turning the page and reading the whole story, Barry realized that the disfigurement was due to an excessive use of chemical skin whiteners. Obama confessed the physical effect of the realization of the negativity of blackness on his own body, feverish and silenced: ‘I felt my face and neck get hot [...] I had no voice for my newfound fear’ (ibid.: 30). The event is quickly followed by a Fanonian moment of reassessing Barry’s favourite television shows, and of seeing for the first time that ‘Cosby never got the girl on I Spy, that the black man on Mission Impossible spent all his time underground’ (ibid.: 30; emphasis mine). In this episode Obama is much closer to the black man in the Fanonian cinema than to a commercial-advertising white criterion of beauty: ‘Impossible d’aller au cinéma sans me rencontrer’, writes Fanon. ‘À l’entracte, juste avant le film, je m’attends. Ceux qui sont devant moi me regardent, m’épient, m’attendent. Un nègre-groom va apparaître. Le cœur me tourne la tête’ [I can’t go to the movies without meeting myself [...] During the break, right before the movie, I expect myself. The people in front of me look at me, spy on me, expect me. A negro-boy will soon appear. My heart makes my head spin] (Fanon, 1952: 113). Obama’s and Fanon’s experiences of their exteriorized vilified skin, as well as the deep physical discomfort that ensues, are strikingly similar. This epidermalization, to use a Fanonian term, is in itself enough to link Obama to the African Diasporic community as a whole, even if his personal history differs from that of the descendants of deported African slaves.

In 2008, on his website Montray Kreyol, Confiant, along with his editorial team, had described the then presidential candidate as ‘un yankee noir. Un Black anglo-saxon protestant aucunement différent, hormis le bronzage, de son compatriote McCain’ [a black Yankee. A black protestant Anglo-Saxon in no way different from his compatriot McCain, save for the tan]. While the editorial team’s criticism of Obama as a political figure – and of the American imperialism he represents – can be quite justified, it is nonetheless surprising that they strip him of his racial identity. By the reference to his ‘tan’, Confiant and his team sever Obama from his belonging to a history of racialized America, in a way reminiscent of Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, who had described Obama as ‘young, handsome, and tanned’ (Berlusconi, 2008). The same stroke strips him of his skin and of his history. Even though Obama, as he admitted himself in Dreams From My Father,
was not socially, culturally, economically like African Americans linked to an inherited history of Diaspora and slavery, he was nonetheless legally and culturally positioned as black. The birth of a child of multiracial parents like Obama was still a crime in 1961. In 1967, anti-miscegenation laws were still enforced in seventeen Southern states (all the former slave states plus Oklahoma), as American poet Natasha Trethewey reminds us poignantly: ‘I return / to Mississippi, state that made me a crime’ (Trethewey, 2006: 46).

More attuned to the political and legal American context than Confiant and his editorial team, Patrick Chamoiseau and Édouard Glissant insist that Obama is ‘un Noir, métissé de blanc mais les critères disent que la plus infime goutte de sang noir fait ici de vous un noir à part entière’ [a Black man, mitigated with white, but the criteria speak loud and clear: here, the most infinitesimal drop of black blood turns you into a full-blooded black] (Chamoiseau and Glissant, 2009: 7).

**Creolizing Barack: A Mutating World**

On the other end of the Martinican intellectual spectrum from Confiant, and contrary to Confiant’s depiction in which Obama’s racial significance disappears under his cultural and political allegiance to a capitalist power, Chamoiseau and Glissant, in *L’Intraitable beauté du monde: adresse à Barack Obama* (2009), wrote in praise of the American president. For Chamoiseau and Glissant, Obama’s creolized self comes to represent a community – that of the descendants of the African Diaspora – to which he does not belong by inheritance but rather by stance and choice. Obama not only becomes assimilated to a Martinican Diasporic identity, but also acts as one of its main constructive agents.

Chamoiseau and Glissant call Obama ‘l’homme de la créolisation’ [the man of creolization] (Chamoiseau and Glissant, 2009) because he embodies the process of creolization through his complex cultural, familial and racial diversity impossible to fix in one static definition. Obama is an agent of creolization, let us insist, not the representative of métissage. Glissant is careful to distinguish between métissage and créolisation: ‘La créolisation diffracte quand le métissage appauvrit […] Bref, [la créolisation est] un métissage, mais avec une résultante qui va plus loin et qui est imprévisible’ [creolization diffracts while métissage flattens […] In short, [creolization is] a form of métissage, but with a result that goes further and that is unpredictable] (1999: 50). For Glissant, while métissage is calculable and stifling, creolization is an unpredictable dynamic process, which leads to openness rather than fixity. Moreover, while métissage is rooted in a biological discourse assuming discrete and predictable categories of race,
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creolization, based on a cultural and linguistic model, escapes the rules of Mendel’s genetics: ‘On peut calculer les effets d’un métissage de plantes par boutures ou d’animaux par croisements. On peut calculer que des pois rouges et des pois blancs mélangés par greffe donneront à telle génération ceci, à telle génération cela. Mais la créolisation, c’est le métissage avec une valeur ajoutée qui est l’imprévisibilité’ [The effects of métissage of plants by grafting or animals by crossing can be measured. The result of grafting of red beans with white beans can be calculated in that they will result in such and such a way in various generations. But creolization is métissage with the added value of unpredictability] (Glissant, 1996: 18–19). In his March 2008 speech on race Obama describes his family history as what could be a textbook example of Glissant’s creolization:

I am the son of a black man from Kenya and a white woman from Kansas. I was raised with the help of a white grandfather who survived a Depression to serve in Patton’s Army during World War II and a white grandmother who worked on a bomber assembly line [...] I’ve gone to some of the best schools in America and lived in one of the world’s poorest nations. I am married to a black American who carries within her the blood of slaves and slaveowners – an inheritance we pass on to our two precious daughters. I have brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews, uncles and cousins, of every race and every hue, scattered across three continents [...] it is a story that has seared into my genetic makeup the idea that this nation is more than the sum of its parts – that out of many, we are truly one. (Obama, 2008)

Obama’s final sentence is an almost word-for-word echo of Glissant’s definition of creolization: ‘la créolisation, c’est bien le métissage des cultures avec une résultante qui va plus loin que les données d’origine’ [creolization is indeed cultural métissage, whose result goes beyond the sum of its parts] (Glissant: 1999, 50). Moreover, Obama’s self-portrait welcomes unlimited categories: black, white, augmented and complicated by the determinants ‘of every race and every hue’. He is black, white, American, Kenyan, Indonesian, Hawaiian, African American, by inheritance, marriage, location, culture and choice. His body stretches out from the wealthiest to the poorest, from the patriotic to the cosmopolitan, from the foreigner to the native, from the wounds of slavery to the preciousness of two daughters, creolizing ad infinitum. ‘I am married to a black American who carries within her the blood of slaves and slaveowners – an inheritance we pass on to our two precious daughters’. The ‘we’ of the previous sentence consolidates around the shared history of slavery, passed on not from parents to child, through the vertical inheritance of ‘filiation’, as Glissant would have it, but rather through what he would call the horizontal movement of expanse or Relation, through his union with his
wife Michelle and through the relationship of his wife and daughters to the inheritance of slavery (see ibid.: 59–75).

Also, he relates to the African American community through work, by choosing to become an ‘active relay’ in the struggle for equal rights: ‘Obama est un créole étasunien ayant choisi de participer à la communauté noire américaine’ [Obama is a United States Creole who chose to take part in the African American community] (Chamoiseau and Glissant, 2009: 70). In this, as well, Obama performs Relation. This is perhaps why Glissant surprisingly addresses president Obama in the following terms: ‘Et vous voilà, vous, fils du gouffre’ [And there you are, son of the abyss] (Glissant, 2009: 5). As we know, Glissant associates the *gouffre* or the abyss with the unfathomable wounds of slavery left on the bottom of the ocean and of the imaginary (see Glissant, 1990: 17–21). Glissant and Chamoiseau remind us of this meaning of the abyss in their letter to President Obama: ‘Or la rumeur a quitté les fonds [marins], et à travers vous, monsieur, voilà qu’elle nous fascine de cela même que les nations des hommes connaissent actuellement de plus dominant entre toutes les nations: les États-Unis d’Amérique’ [The clamour has left the bottom [of the ocean], and through you, sir, it now captivates us with the very thing that nations of humans currently know as the most dominant among all nations: the United States of America] (Glissant and Chamoiseau, 2009: 2–3).

While Obama’s ancestors from Kenya and Kansas did not share with Glissant or Chamoiseau the past of the Middle Passage and enslavement, the election of Obama nonetheless represents the underground or undersea memory of the abyss that has surfaced from the bottom of the American sea of hatred to the centre-stage of North American, Caribbean and world political consciousness and power. It is through him that the abyss entered the political consciousness of the United States: ‘Avec lui, la multiplicité est entrée dans la conscience politique du pays, après en avoir marqué le peuplement, la composition sociale, et les convulsions’ [After him, multiplicity entered the political consciousness of the nation, after having shaped its demography, its social components, and its convulsions] (Chamoiseau and Glissant, 2009: 15).

Calling Obama ‘son of the abyss’ also avoids any epithet or definition that would stabilize Obama’s human complexity and productive contradictions. The abyss defines him by the hollow, by a hole, which includes but surpasses all the epithets that attempt to seize him, such as, ‘Barack Obama, superman’, ‘un Américain du tiers-monde’ [a third-world American], ‘[L’homme aux] longues mains hypnotiques’ [[The man with] long hypnotic hands], ‘Barack Obama: Le Basket dans la peau’ [Barack Obama: Basketball skin deep], to cite a few striking descriptions in the French press (Duriez, 2008; Jarreau, 2008; Giberné, 2008).
The abyss shelters a beautiful onomastic disorder without containing or fixing it. The hope is that instead of stabilizing Obama the French are increasingly becoming destabilized in their own thinking of race because of Obama’s defiance of categories; that words such as métis and their racialist roots will increasingly lose ground. This dynamism naturally also upsets US categories of racial thinking, as Louis Chude-Sokei has argued: ‘Obama’s run for the presidency carries the promise of spotlighting this “category crisis” at long last. There is the possibility of a conversation in which Africans in the US, along with other black immigrant groups, may emerge distinctly from the all-consuming category of “black”’ (Chude-Sokei, 2007).

The concept of creolization, which Glissant sometimes equates to Relation, or gouffre, as opposed to the flattening and predictable position of the métis, enables the maintaining, around Obama, of a productive disorder. While reading the sign Obama through the lens of creolization theory, it is also crucial to acknowledge what the sign Obama brings to Martinique and to the world. Not only is Obama destabilized in a good way by the process of creolization but, also, his unclassifiable identity helps to destabilize French, American and Martinican categories of racial thinking.

Guadeloupean writer and playwright Alain Foix calls Obama a mutating man, who brings in his wake the mutation of his nation: ‘Ce qui fait le caractère révolutionnaire de l’accession au pouvoir d’Obama signifié préalablement comme noir est le fait que ce nous en action est un état nouveau de la nation qui change littéralement de peau, une mue sociale, culturelle, politique et symbolique’ [What is revolutionary in Obama’s accession to power, a man previously signified as black, is the fact that this “we” at work defines a new state of the nation that literally sheds skin, a social, cultural, political, and symbolic shedding] (Foix, 2009: 66–67).

This is why Obama’s surfacing as the face of one of the most imposing Western powers is revolutionary: in his radical performance of the reinvention of epidermalization. What was, for Fanon, the internalization of racial violence in the ‘white world’ and its projection onto the skin, having effects as disastrous as the literal disfigurement of the user of skin whiteners, or as young Barry’s psychological wounds, becomes, with the election of Obama, a projection of the creolized skin onto the surface of the world, and onto the centre-stage of world power (see Fanon, 1952: 88–94). I am not claiming that the Fanonian form of epidermalization has magically disappeared from the surface of the earth with the election of Barack Obama. Nor am I arguing that the election of an African American man as the head of the United States has signalled the beginning of a post-racialized society and the end of racism. 14

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I am simply indicating that his visibility slowly contributes to the rethinking of the realm of power that Fanon called ‘the world’ – read ‘the white world’ – by slowly dissociating the word ‘world’ from its accidental epithet ‘white’ (Fanon, 1952: 88, 103).

Works Cited


remains an important concern in institutional, social, political, and psychological experiences. See, e.g., Hutchings, 2009: 938, who concludes that while ‘the symbolism associated with the election of the first Black president certainly represents a milestone in American history … the racial divide in political attitudes, as well as in social and economic outcomes, remains stubbornly immune to the passage of time.’ Desmond King and Rogers M. Smith (2009: 25) similarly expose persisting concrete racial inequalities. Psychologist Thomas Pettigrew (2009: 285) notes: ‘racial violence escalated and erupted in the North as well as the South [during Obama’s campaign and thereafter]. Cross-burnings, threats, intimidation, and racist graffiti proliferated across the nation but typically did not receive nationwide publicity.’ I would like to extend my gratitude to the participants of the Gustafson Seminar on ‘The “Realities” of Race’, at Emory University for sharing their interdisciplinary expertise on race in the US and particularly to Professors Regine O. Jackson and Amanda E. Lewis for recommending these articles.


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